

Architectures of Memory

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# ARCHITECTURES OF MEMORY

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## Living Rooms: Artist Statement

I returned to my home country during the summer of 2013 to spend a few months making myself at home with four families I had never met before. We all live in the same neighborhood of Retreat in the city of Cape Town where I made these photographs.

My time with them was not spent photographing people. Instead I paid attention to the places where they lived their private lives. I noticed the inside of their homes, which are all identical in design and built by oppressive regimes for those not classified as White in South Africa.

Now these houses not only shaped my country, they also shaped my childhood.

Inside my grandmother's identical house, I spent almost every Christmastime as girl.

These old memories took on a new life inside the rooms I photographed, "soos 'n museum,"<sup>1</sup> one woman gasped after I showed her my photographs of her house. In the end their home became *my* home, which then wrote the story of *our* home from inside the collective memory of living rooms that shaped us all.

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<sup>1</sup> Afrikaans for 'like a museum'.

## Living Rooms: A Photographic Series



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## Preface



“Since for us a room is but an aspect of a life, just as we speak of “living a life” so we speak of “living a room”.  
The “living room” we are studying is living thus not merely in distinction to kitchen or bedroom, but because it really is.”

Denis Wood & Robert J. Beck  
*Home Rules*, 1994

This piece delves into a brief encounter that long preceded the making of my photographic series *Living Rooms*. It was a moment, no, a feeling really, that came to define this piece I have entitled, *Landscapes of My Remembering*.

A feeling? What an arguable idea! Which is why this essay makes no claim to certainty. Instead, *Landscapes of My Remembering*, like *Living Rooms*, is an act of “intimate exposure” (Bystrom & Nuttall, 2013: 308). A term Bystrom “indicates [as] a set of diverse acts that involve revealing inner aspects and places of the self and self-making; these may be acts of self-exposure or exposure of the private lives of others” (Ibid: 310). The intimacy I expose here relates to the most commonplace of feelings: the familiar *feeling* of being *at home*.

I once, unexpectedly, experienced the feeling of being at home inside an unfamiliar house. In trying to make sense of this, I discovered that the room is a memory (Wood and Beck, 1994: xv). I learnt that in the most literal of ways, rooms give shape to the content of our lives and their arrangements are what reinforce our past behaviors inside them.

*Landscapes of My Remembering* uses the idea of *the room as a memory* to elucidate the seemingly benign words of Romanian writer, Richard Wager who writes that “memory is at home in rooms” (Minda, 2007: 15). These ideas of rooms as memory and memory being at home in rooms positions memory as a real and imagined process. *Landscapes of My Remembering* also positions home also as both a real and

imagined place. *Home* in this piece becomes an “auratic” (George, 1996: 2) term that imbues, whatever is described in relation to it, with a kind of life force.

This *feeling* of home I explore in Beatrice Minda’s *Innenwelt- Inner World, Photographs of Romania and Exile* (2007). Minda photographed rooms within Romanian homes located both inside and outside the country.

I believe *Innenwelt* is about *home* in the deepest sense. It captures the inherent relationships of time, which are central to individual experiences of *home*. This feeling of home Minda successfully depicts by presenting rooms in the likeness of a remembered place and time with photography.

Rooms as memories, home as real and imagined, and the place of photography in revealing both aspects of the real and the imagined, serves in this piece as a kind of refracted analysis of my photographic series, *Living Rooms*. It considers what inspired my photography; why I chose the subject matter I did rather than analyzing my photographs themselves. I chose this route of intimate exposure because, frankly, if I had the ability to put *Living Rooms* into words rather than into pictures, I may not have decided to photograph in the first place.

Needless to say, the relationship between photographs and words is closer than we think it is (Beckman and Weisberg, 2013). *No ideas but in things* the imminent poet William Carlos Williams so famously said. This much quoted mantra Kazemek explains as “...how worlds are created out of the most commonplace things...each thing, each particular, offer[s] us infinite possibilities for worldmaking” (Kazemek, 1987: 22).

Worldmaking is as synonymous with photography (Beckman & Weissberg 2013) as it is with language, and with poetry especially; two worldmaking forms that have fixed both photography and poetry in our world today as uncanny means of description. In the case of photography, when a photographer describes the world with a camera, a photograph is generated: a duplicitous world captured within a frame that convinces us that what we are seeing in the image is the thing itself. (Szarkowski 2007: 8). But, it is not: photographs are the *photographer's* incarnation of a reality that exists nowhere else but as it does within the photograph frame.

Despite these matters of photographic fact or fiction (Thompson 2003) or what Magilow (2013) calls “the unbridgeable gap between representation and reality” (2013: 121), I mention the relationship between photography and language to foreground the assumption on which this piece is based.

Photography is a form of representation, which much like language is also a kind of approximation of reality - one I cannot avoid. James Agee, writer of *Let us Now Praise Famous Men* (1944), the iconic American documentary work with photographs by Walker Evans, agrees that while the camera is...“unique in its power to develop and to delight our ability to see...we are all so deeply caught in the tyranny of words, [that] even where words are not needed, they have sometimes to be used as keys to unlock their own handcuffs” (Burrows 2013: 124).

Whose house is this?  
Whose night keeps out the light?  
In here?  
Say, who owns this house?  
It's not mine.  
I dreamed another, sweeter, brighter  
With a view of lakes crossed in painted boats;  
Of fields wide as arms open for me.  
This house is strange.  
Its shadows lie.  
Say, tell me, why does its lock fit my key?

- Epigraph to *Home*, by Toni Morrison -

## Landscapes of My Remembering

## The Memory Felt

*Living Rooms* was inspired by an almost identical encounter to the one Morrison describes in the epigraph to her novel, *Home* (2012). I too had entered a house I had never been in before, and once I had entered it, a strange sense of belonging overcame me. It was a familiar feeling inside an unfamiliar house.

Now, I should mention here that I wasn't unaccustomed to that house. In fact, I knew its entire makeup. I knew where every room in that house would be. I knew that close by the door of the living room, there would be a rectangular, barred window that looked out onto the street. I knew the living room would lead to the narrow doorway of a short passage that led to the small kitchen to my right and to my left, to two bedrooms. I knew that between the bedroom and the kitchen there would be a little bathroom whose door would be closed as the only private space seeable from either outside the front door, or from the settee against the wall with the rectangular window. I even knew where the attention of the room would be: on the side of the living room where the television and the biggest display cabinet of memorabilia would be standing. It was against the wall farthest from the front door.

While I knew the shape of this unfamiliar house, I also knew to whom it belonged. The house belonged to my mother's mother, whom I knew as Auntie<sup>2</sup> Annie. You may wonder why I had never visited her house before, but that falls outside the scope of this essay. The most important thing here about Aunty Annie is that she lived in Delft, a Cape Flats township in Cape Town, in one of the thousands of identical, cramped public housing units, which many South Africans would know as 'council houses.'

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<sup>2</sup> 'Auntie' is Afrikaans for 'aunt'. The term is also used to denote respect for any older female figure.

Council houses were an essential part of the state apparatus of separate development that characterized the British and Afrikaner regimes. Under their rule, council houses were built as two or three-storied, or sometimes single, detached units for people of color in the effort to keep races apart in South Africa. Whether Apartheid can claim the biggest government effort at housing provision on the continent, at the time, remains unknown, but the mass reorganization of South Africa's cities and towns under Apartheid and its Group Areas Act of 1950, spanned more than two decades (Christopher, 1994).

Now my maternal grandmother, Auntie Annie, was one of the hundreds of thousands of South Africans who have lived in council houses for most of their lives, as did my father's mother, Ouma<sup>3</sup> Ellie. Her council house was built in the rural fishing town of Mossel Bay, almost 300 miles from Delft in Cape Town.

In Ouma Ellie's council house, I spent most of my Christmases as a girl growing up. This time and place was reminiscent of the strange sense of child-like belonging, a familiar warm feeling of smallness, which overwhelmed me in Auntie Annie's unfamiliar council house. Inside her living room, I felt *at home*.

That felt memory of inhabiting Ouma Ellie's council house as a child, while being in Auntie Annie's unfamiliar council house as a grown woman stayed with me, influencing my course of study in the run up to creating this project. Learning about aspects of material culture through photographic archives occupied me most, in particular, the corresponding idea- and object-world of these fields. Early on in my studies, I became interested in architecture and photography through most notably David Goldblatt in his book, *South Africa: The*

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<sup>3</sup> 'Ouma' is Afrikaans for grandmother.

*Structure of Things Then* (1998), and Zwelethu Mthethwa's *Interiors* (2002) series. But one photographer, Walker Evans, in his book, *Message from the Interior* (1966), had photographed architecture and rooms, as I had never seen them before.

The nature of photographed rooms, in retrospect, also influenced what I recalled about my felt memory. The feeling that Evans' photographs evoked in me had me recall that visceral sense I experienced inside Auntie Annie's house. I knew it had something to do with that physical space before I realized, I could not have felt that anywhere else but inside that council house.

But rooms, as you shall read, are more than just their physical parts. I had that strong felt memory in spite of my familiarity with the identical physical scheme of council housing. While this may explain why I knew the layout of Auntie Annie's house despite never having been in it before, it did not explain why I had such a strong felt memory there.

Like Morrison's character in her epigraph, I wondered, how come *its lock fit my key*?



## The Memory as Room

Wood and Beck in their book, *Home Rules* (1994), suggest that rooms are mnemonic. *Home Rules* (1994) is a visual and first person extended study into one particular family and their relationships to the living room of their house. *Home Rules* begins with the claim that “the room is a memory” (1994: xv), which is based on the assumption that rooms are spaces that when we enter them; we immediately know where to go and what to do inside them.

If a room *is* a memory, “the instantiation of a kind of collective memory” (Ibid), then council houses in Cape Town, both literally and symbolically, memorialize the ideology of separate development in South Africa. Today, it can be said that council houses and their rooms embody a South African history in both its object-reality and in its imaginative substance.

I interject here to focus on one aspect of the complexity associated with Apartheid and its colonial predecessors. The most apparent (albeit uneven) characteristic among colonialism in South Africa, and Apartheid in particular, was their emphasis on *spacial* policy (Christopher, 1994 and Western, 1996). Apartheid in particular, according to South African cultural geographer, A.J. Christopher, was “acutely place conscious” (Christopher, 1994: 6).

The place consciousness inherent to the building of council houses on the Cape Flats is what shaped the geography of the city of Cape Town with the intent of containment (Bickford-Smith, van Heyningen, Worden, 1999). Today, council houses mark miles and miles on the outskirts of Cape Town forming a city of “distinct landscapes of enclosed spaces for rich and poor and those in-between” (Lurie, 2004: 9).

Given the history of these structures, I draw attention to the things contained inside these spaces; the lives lived inside this history. As Miller argues in his introduction to *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors* (2001) “It is the material culture within our home that appears as both our appropriation of the larger world and often as the representation of that world within our private domain” (Miller, 2001: 1). He believes that “most of what matters to people is happening behind closed doors of the private sphere...where they reflect upon and face up to themselves away from others” (Ibid). This “intimate relationship” (Ibid) of taking the outside in and making the inside known, within the home, Miller would agree forms part of the foundation of people’s private lives. This intimate relationship as expressed within the council house then becomes especially salient in the South African context. But how is it practiced?

*Home Rules* positions the powers of a room as memory as stemming from the literal arrangements of rooms. The arrangement of the things contained inside of rooms however, is not the only factor at play. The room as memory simultaneously is also shaped by past habitual activities that are then performed inside that arrangement which cultivate that intimate relationship of which Miller writes. I believe this is what the authors of *Home Rules* mean when they write, “...insofar as these arrangements emerge from the pasts of those living the room, the room is a memory of those pasts” (Wood and Beck, 1994: xv).

## The Look of Memory



©Beatrice Minda, *Innewelt*.



©Beatrice Minda, *Innewelt*.



©Beatrice Minda, *Innewelt*.

Romanian writer, Richard Wagner claims, “memory is at home in rooms” (Minda, 2007: 15) in his accompanying essay to the photography book by Beatrice Minda, entitled, *Innewelt- Inner World, Photographs of Romania and Exile* (2007). Her collection of seventy color photographs of rooms were made inside homes belonging to Romanians and Romanian exiles, emigrants, and itinerant workers in both Romania, and in Germany and France.

Wagner suggests, in his simply-put idea, a curious relationship of past and present, which converge inside the rooms of *Innenwelt*. Much like *Home Rules* situates rooms as where “the past becomes present to us directly” (Wood and Beck, 1994: xv); Minda renders her photographs of rooms as “dream spaces,” instances where “the past is remembered in the present” (Kavanagh, 2000: 4).

But what does it mean to *feel at home* within these mnemonic arrangements that support the comfort of inhabiting, the *feeling* of being home? And how would this be photographed?

Minda’s *Innewelt* depicts both the evidence of home but also the sensation of home. She evokes a feeling of being at home literally with both the light her photographs capture, with the stance she photographs with and with the sequence in which the images are arranged in the book. The shape of mnemonic progression that *Innewelt* communicates culminates in brief testimonies recorded at the end where Romanian homeowners express the feeling of home in their own words.

Here I should mention that I have not verified Minda’s technique as a photographer. Little evidence exists about how the photographs in *Innenwelt* were made. My claims, rather, are drawn from my own experience as a photographer.

In looking at Minda’s photographs from this perspective, I chose to begin with the quality of light. Wagner calls “the light that falls into these rooms like an apparition of childhood, like the murmur of timelessness” (Minda, 2007: 23). And I would agree. Perhaps Minda masked her use of flash or perhaps she never used a flash and relied on long exposures. Whatever method she employed, her photographic effect with light envelops these rooms and the inanimate things contained in them with natural glowing illumination and soft shadows.

Oftentimes, however, her effect with light is less subtle. Many photographs show windows devoid of detail or shadows and filled with light. These windows seem not only to animate the rooms but they also seem to occupy rooms as a piece of furniture would.

With her use of light, Minda photographs these rooms from a vantage point that helps achieve an ethereal effect. She commonly makes her images at a wide remove that opens her photographed rooms into lush interiors. While her stance is distanced from the rooms' centers of activity, Minda's photographs of interiors retain the intimacy associated with our ideas about *home*.

Minda photographs askance, at an angle that renders a literal depth of seeing, something which photographing a room head on or even from a directly sidelong perspective would not have achieved. Her askance remove deepens the photographic depth of field and takes our eyes into rooms as though we are seeing into them through a door ajar. This photographic stance makes us not just simply *see* rooms, but, rather, makes us *inquire* into them.

*Innenwelt* not only evokes aspects of time and memory with the use of light and photographic stance as I described it, but the book also gives form to these ideas with the sequence in which photographs are arranged. For the most part, images in the book are arranged in chronological order according to the year each photograph was made, beginning in 2003 and ending in 2006.

The book opens with a series of rooms arranged with wooden furniture and ornamental antiques, decorated with plush fabrics, carpets and wallpapers inside spacious, middle class homes in Romania. The remainder of the book presents photographs of rooms in Romanian homes located in Germany and in France. Some of these homes seem of similar economic status to the homes photographed in Romania, and others do not. Minda ends her lengthy photographic series with these images of diminished means.

Despite the lack of material wealth contained inside these rooms, the lives lived there are not pictured as diminished. Her consistent photographic style and chronological sequence of her photographs have us see these makeshift homes as rather abundant. Minda's sequence, from start to finish, builds within the viewer the natural ability to recall homes originally made in Romania and remember them inside the rooms of more indigent homes in Germany and France.

I would like to add that *Innenwelt*, in fact is about more than just photographed rooms. It also reveals the private particulars of individual lives. Curator Ulrich Pohlmann, in her accompanying essay to *Innenwelt* suggests that Minda's photographs are "...psychograms of their occupants, reflecting their history and relationship to the present" (Minda, 2007: 9).

Psychograms, as Pohlmann puts it, are psychological maps that describe the mental geography of individuals. *Psychograms* are much like *photograms* that record the shape of objects after they have been exposed to light after being placed onto light sensitive paper. This psychic outline, as Pohlmann claims of *Innenwelt*, also demonstrates relationships of past and present that are contained within these photographed rooms.

But do *Innenwelt*'s photographed rooms really serve as "psychograms of their occupants"? Could Minda have captured with her camera the collapse of a family's or individual's past and present, as it is contained within rooms? Because if this is so, as Pohlmann suggests, then Minda's photographs of rooms become cartographies of interior lives, protracted over time, they become living rooms.

The testimonies of participants with which Minda ends *Innenwelt* attest to this. The testimonies of the men and women in whose homes she photographed are telling of the place of memory in the home. One resident longs to “connect to [their] earlier life”. Another believes that “objects are my roots” having them as the “benevolent eye that accompanies me” (Minda, 2007: 157).

Home making is for another a “continuation of life” (Ibid), with one resident knowing after she had moved “...right from the beginning how [she] would arrange the furniture” (Minda, 2007: 156). Another simply wished “to reconstruct the atmosphere of home” (Ibid).

## At Home in Memory

*Innenwelt*, its accompanying essays, and *Home Rules* creates a thought provoking constellation of photography, real and imagined homes, and mnemonic rooms. *Innenwelt* in particular demonstrates with photography that rooms can be mnemonic; that *home* is both a real and imagined place; and that photographs have a duplicitous ability to define our ideas of both. These ideas skirts the surface of the visceral, instinctual sense of home we embody when we *feel at home*, when our remembered past collapses with our experienced present.

Why else would Wagner write that “memory holds us” (Minda, 2007: 15)? It held me, I now know, in Auntie Annie’s unfamiliar house. I have come to understand that it wasn’t the layout of her house but rather the arrangement of her living room that must have comforted me most.

The red wooden settee by the front door was similar to the settee I had slept on as a child in Ouma Ellie’s identical living room. It occupied the same position in her living room as it did in Auntie Annie’s council house. When I sat in Auntie Annie’s settee on short wooden legs close to the floor, I was in a company of matching settees just as I remembered were congregated in Ouma Ellie’s living room.

My feet skirting across Auntie Annie’s patterned linoleum floor sounded true for another time I remembered as girl running through Ouma Ellie’s small council house playing make believe.



The people in the photographs around me amongst Auntie Annie's things were small in tall glasses on shelves and others were big in hand-colored portraits on the walls of her living room. These people I almost recognized -- like the two men on the wall farthest from the front door wearing hats in their Sunday best, reminiscent of grandfathers I would have seen at church in Mossel Bay.

The dim light in Auntie Annie's living room was dim like it always was at night at Ouma Ellie's, casting long shadows over four-legged ceramic creatures perched deadpan on frilled mats. These glazed companions stood at attention. Much like the mirrored cabinets of china stacked side-by-side behind glass doors.

I became aware of this dense mysterious world of ornate belongings arranged within my grandmother's living rooms. Amongst every piece of it, I *felt at home*. Time and memory had collapsed. My remembered past was contained within my experienced present to become, the landscape of my remembering.



Auntie Annie's Living Room (2012)

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## Participants



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